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ABSTRACT

The research considered here provides the basis for a number of general observations. Evaluation itself appears to be worthwhile, both as a way of measuring principal performance and of improving it by focusing attention on how principals are doing. The best evaluators appear to be teachers. District personnel and outside observers can also make useful evaluations. Principal self-evaluations are not very objective. Quality (how effectively principals perform key competencies) is more important than quantity (how often they perform them). Evaluations should focus on competencies that make a difference in the quality of education schools provide; key competencies are not always what educators think they are. Staffing and curriculum and instruction are important areas of leadership, and implementing and evaluating are key functions. The best evaluations are made by large groups of evaluators using precise instruments. Moreover, principals, who are, after all, the group being evaluated, should have a say in the kind of evaluation program that is used. Principals who help with the process and understand how it works will perceive that, despite its problems, evaluation is an opportunity, not a threat. (Author/IRT)

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RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

Principal Evaluation

School principals must sometimes wonder whether evaluation isn't more of a threat than an opportunity. It certainly has its risks. No one likes being judged unfavorably, of course, but even a favorable evaluation can—if it is inaccurate or misleading—lead to serious problems. Worse, because their job is so complex, difficult, and demanding, principals are easily misjudged.

Balancing these potential problems, however, is extraordinary promise: a good evaluation program can produce valuable information about how a principal is performing on the job. Ideally, the principal can use this information to become a more effective leader and, ultimately, to improve his or her school.

In theory, evaluation—deciding how good a job a principal is doing—should be relatively simple. Unfortunately, it is not; no one is even sure what makes a principal effective, much less how to measure effectiveness precisely. As a result, evaluation can mean many things. Principals can be evaluated by themselves, teachers, students, district officials, and outside observers, among others. Evaluations can focus on general behavior patterns or specific actions.

Among the things that can be evaluated are school climate; the quality of a school's educational program; how well the principal gets along with students, teachers, the public, and district personnel; and how well managed and orderly the school is. The assessment center program developed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals has identified twelve behavior dimensions that determine a principal's ability to do the job, and these, too, can be evaluated. They include problem analysis, judgment, organizational ability, decisiveness, leadership, sensitivity, range of interests, personal motivation, appropriate educational values, stress tolerance, and oral and written communication skills.

In the face of all these variables, a good evaluation program must be well defined and provide clear-cut answers to such questions as: *Who* will do the evaluation? *What* will they evaluate? *How* will the evaluation be carried out? Our discussion will explore several research studies and the light they shed on these questions. Although it is not possible to design an evaluation program that is perfect—factual, unbiased, and useful in all situations—we will find a number of guidelines to follow in developing a program that meets the needs of a given school situation.

The Contingency Theory

The most important goal of a principal evaluation program is to find out if the principal is an effective leader. This sounds simple, but, in practice, effective leadership is not easy to define, much less to measure. A good deal of research has been devoted to the question of what makes a leader effective; the only conclusive finding is that there are no simple or absolute answers.

Good leadership means different things in different situations. Effectiveness depends on how well a leader's

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style—or way of doing things—fits the needs of a specific situation; most leaders are good in some situations but not in others. This is recognized in Fiedler's Contingency Theory of Leadership Effectiveness, which suggests that leaders tend to fall into two types, those who are primarily interested in human relations—in getting along with their subordinates—and those who are task-oriented — concerned with getting the job done. Situations vary according to their favorability, which is determined by three things: the quality of leader-member relations in the group, how structured the group's task is, and how much formal power goes with the position the leader holds. In general, as these variables increase, a situation becomes more favorable.

Chemers and Skrzypek were the first researchers to test the Contingency Theory by manipulating all three situational variables. They found, as the theory predicts, that leaders who are more oriented toward human relations do best in moderately favorable situations, while task-oriented leaders are at their best in very favorable or unfavorable situations.

The Contingency Theory was developed and tested largely in studies of military organizations, which differ from schools in some important ways. Nevertheless, the basic conclusion that an effective leader is one whose style is suited to the needs of the situation is important. It suggests that a good evaluation program must be sensitive to the different situations that arise in schools; standardized evaluations that treat all leaders and all schools in the same way may not provide accurate measures of leadership effectiveness.

Project R.O.M.E.

Project R.O.M.E. (Results Oriented Management in Education), a pilot assessment program developed in Georgia schools, is probably the most thorough and comprehensive study of principal evaluation yet attempted. Project R.O.M.E. was an effort to identify the competencies educators *thought* were important and to test them to find out which ones actually made a difference in the quality of education a school provided.

Developing a list of key competencies was not easy. As the project's staff notes, the principal's responsibilities range from serving as a school's instructional leader to acting as "a manager, personnel director, technician, banker, public relations expert, human relations consultant, media specialist, etc." After developing an extensive list of possible competencies, the researchers gradually succeeded in identifying those that were most important.

The study included elementary and secondary schools in a variety of urban, suburban, and rural districts. Principals were rated according to how frequently and effectively they demonstrated various competencies. Members of each group of evaluators—students, teachers, principals, central office personnel, and external observers —were asked to judge only those areas of principal performance with which they were most familiar; thus teacher evaluations, for example, were much more comprehensive than student evaluations.

The findings of Project R.O.M.E. suggested a variety of conclusions. It was apparent that the *effectiveness* with which principals performed a certain competency was more meaningful than the *frequency* with which they performed it. Teacher ratings were the most valid predictors of school outcomes. Conversely, principal self-evaluations were the least valid predictors.

Since principals are not directly involved in delivering educational services in the classroom, it is not surprising that their actions affect the quality of the school's educational program indirectly, through the influence principals have on teachers. Principals' effectiveness (as evaluated by teachers) has a strong influence on how teachers feel about their schools. Teacher attitudes are, in turn, closely related to the school's educational effectiveness as measured by students' average daily attendance. (Student attitudes, however, did not have much influence on average daily attendance.) The effects of principal competencies, therefore, while indirect, are very real.

When principals do have a lot of direct contact with students, it is not always a good sign. In fact, positive teacher attitudes and high student test performances were frequently associated with a *low* frequency of student interaction with principals. In schools that are doing a good job, principals do not need to have much face-to-face contact with students. Apparently, principals who work closely with teachers to improve instruction can leave the direct contact with students to teachers.

Project R.O.M.E. also reached some interesting conclusions about the relative importance of different competencies. In general, competencies in specific *areas* of responsibility were slightly more important than skills in performing certain *functions*. Three important areas were curriculum and instruction, fiscal management, and staffing; two of the key functions were implementing and evaluating.

Although the survey included only a few secondary schools, it turned up some important differences between key competencies at the elementary and secondary levels. For example, curriculum and instructional leadership was more important for elementary principals, while staffing had more of an impact in secondary schools.

Model Instrument

McIntyre and Grant developed a model administrator evaluation instrument to identify key principal competencies. Superintendents, principals, and teachers were asked to rate how well a principal *should* perform and how well the principals in their schools actually *did* perform in various areas of responsibility. The survey covered large and small (but not medium-sized) schools, with responses coming from eighteen principals, their superintendents, and one hundred and sixty-eight teachers.

The small survey size limits the value of the study, but several of its findings are of interest. School size did not seem to affect responses. The three groups, however, differed significantly in how they rated both ideal and actual principal performance. In general, principals tended to rate themselves higher than did members of the

other two groups. (One principal, who rated himself very highly, got the lowest ratings in the survey from both the teachers in his school and the superintendent in his district.) Principals also tended to see the smallest difference between ideal and actual performances. Teachers generally rated their principals less favorably, but saw them as doing best at the most important jobs and worst at the least important. Superintendents were the group least satisfied with principal performance.

All three groups agreed about the relative importance of various areas of principal responsibility. Staffing, community relations, goal setting, and time and space allocation were judged the four most important—and most effectively performed—functions. At the other end of the spectrum, the authors noted that inservice training and program evaluation were "the two lowest rated areas of principals' performance as seen by all three groups."

Key Competencies

Weber identified four inner-city schools where student reading levels were higher than the norm in such schools. After carefully studying each of these schools, he was able to identify eight factors that made them unusual and that, in his judgment, were responsible for the higher achievement scores: "strong leadership, high expectations, good atmosphere, strong emphasis on reading, additional reading personnel, use of phonics, individualization, and careful evaluation of student progress."

These factors are all influenced, in one way or another, by competencies of the school principal: expectations are related to planning and general leadership skills; emphasis on reading, use of phonics, and individualization all indicate effective instructional leadership; assigning additional reading personnel is a staffing decision; and emphasis on evaluation starts with the principal.

Implications

The single fact that emerges most clearly from these studies is that evaluation is a complex process that is, by nature, inexact. Evaluation can be biased, and people may disagree about the competencies that are most important to evaluate. As the Contingency Theory shows, effective leadership is a dynamic, creative interaction between the leader and the needs of the environment.

Evaluations should be as precise as possible, reflecting conditions at each individual school. All the successful programs considered above used checklists of specific skills and competencies, rather than nebulous essay-type descriptions of principal behavior. As many people as possible should participate in the evaluation process, so that the collective judgment of the group can offset the personal biases of individuals.

Research data offer a good deal of information about who is best able to evaluate principals. The most obvious conclusion is that teachers make the best evaluators. External observers and district personnel can also make useful contributions to the evaluation process. The roles of superintendents and other central office personnel in the process presumably would vary according to the type of planning system the district employs. In a management-by-objectives program, for example, the central office would likely have a very prominent role in evaluating principals. Evidence fails to indicate that student evaluations are of much value.

Principal self-evaluations are not a reliable indicator of the kind of job the principal is doing. Self-evaluations, nevertheless, are not worthless. They may not measure performance objectively, but they are the best available way to find out how principals *think* they are doing. Principal self-evaluations should be used in conjunction with

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other data to pinpoint areas of faulty communications and to determine how aware principals are of their strengths and weaknesses. This can be particularly helpful when principals have blind spots, areas where they mistakenly think they are doing well (and, therefore, do not need to improve).

Three studies provide information, some of it contradictory, about the most important things to evaluate. Project R.O.M.E. identified curriculum and instruction, fiscal management, and staff personnel as key areas of leadership, and implementing and evaluating as crucial functions. McIntyre and Grant found that educators stressed skills in community relations, staffing, allocating time and space, and goal setting. Weber's findings suggest the importance of leadership in planning, instruction, staffing, and evaluation.

In trying to interpret these lists, it is important to understand the basic differences among the three studies. McIntyre and Grant listed competencies that teachers, principals, and superintendents *thought* were important. Project R.O.M.E. identified competencies that could be *proved* to affect the quality of education a school provided. Weber did the same thing, in a less formal way.

Despite their differences, all three studies agreed on the importance of staffing decisions, particularly in secondary schools, as Project R.O.M.E. found. They disagreed, however, about the importance of evaluation. While Project R.O.M.E. and Weber both found that evaluation is one of the most important functions of the principal, all three groups surveyed by McIntyre and Grant ranked it one of the least important. This suggests that educators are sometimes mistaken about what competencies principals need and emphasizes the need for evaluation efforts based on competencies of proved rather than assumed importance.

After looking over all the material on evaluation, we can make a number of general observations. Evaluation itself appears to be worthwhile, both as a way of measuring principal performance and possibly of improving it as well, by focusing attention on how principals are doing. An evaluation program must also address the following questions:

Who? The best evaluators appear to be teachers. District personnel and outside observers can also make useful evaluations. Principal self-evaluations are not very objective.

What? Quality (how effectively principals perform key competencies) is more important than quantity (how often they perform them). Evaluations should focus on competencies that make a difference in the quality of education schools provide; key competencies are not always what educators *think* they are. Staffing and curriculum and instruction are important areas of leadership, and implementing and evaluating are two key functions.

How? The best evaluations are made by large groups of evaluators, using precise instruments. Moreover, principals, who are, after all, the group being evaluated, should have a say in the kind of evaluation program that is used. Principals who help with the process and understand how it works will perceive that, despite its problems, evaluation is an opportunity, not a threat.

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